

Audubon official blames town for plover death

By Gary Susswein
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PLYMOUTH — An Audubon Society official blames town officials for the death of a newly hatched piping plover last week on Plymouth Beach.

The bird was run over by a four-wheel-drive truck while town leaders were preparing to close the beach to such vehicles, the Audubon Society official said.

"It was a hatching chick that took its first

steps," said Scott Hecker, director of the Audubon Society's Coastal Waterbird Program in Marshfield. "They found the chick run over."

Hecker accused town officials of dragging their feet in restricting vehicle access Thursday and blamed them for the bird's death. But the officials said they moved as quickly as they could to close the beach and protect the chicks.

"We were there at 7:30 in the morning, and when we left, (conservation agent) John Crane

notified police of the closure," Selectmen Chairwoman Linda Teagan said last night.

Officials at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service confirmed that the bird was found dead and said they are investigating. They said they would not comment further until the investigation is complete.

The piping plover is on the federal government's list of endangered species. A 1986 state statute prohibits vehicles from driving within 300 feet of plover chicks.

Four birds hatched in the middle of a four wheel-drive recreation area on Plymouth Beach on Thursday, prompting officials to set up a buffer zone. The restricted area is beyond the main beach and the front parking lot which remain open.

The vehicle restrictions will remain in effect until the palm-sized chicks move to a more remote location on the beach or until they are

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35 days old and able to fly.

Beach workers have been monitoring the plovers' nests for several weeks. On Wednesday, Crane noticed that the birds were about to hatch. He notified Town Manager Donald Jacobs at about 5:30 p.m., Jacobs said.

Jacobs, Crane and Park Superintendent Douglass Gray met with Teagan and Selectman Roger Silva at 7:30 a.m. Thursday at the beach and had town workers post the restricted access signs by noon.

"I can't speak for the board of selectmen, so I said, 'Let's meet tomorrow morning,' which we did," Jacobs said. "And I don't think John Crane could have notified me any faster."

He said he contacted state officials with questions about the buffer zone after the signs were in place.

But Hecker said the bird was already dead by the time the signs were up. He said it probably

fell into a 10-inch-deep tire track and was run over a few minutes later.

"The selectmen were not quick to go along with this," he said. "They could have saved that bird."

He suggested that Crane should have the authority to close the beach on his own.

But at last night's meeting, selectmen dismissed the suggestion.

The board also expressed frustration at having to keep residents off the beach for an indefinite period.

They complained that the state has provided inconsistent information about the buffer zones.

Teagan read a letter from the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife that stated, "It is not explicitly a violation of the state or federal Endangered Species Act to infringe upon the buffer zones with vehicles."

The board also said it feared that beach access could become more limited as the plover population grows.